

# Nancy Gong

## Developing a Contemporary Artistic Voice

by Colleen Bryan

Nancy Gong has worked in glass for 37 years and might be forgiven for resting in her expertise. However, the New York artist is eagerly searching out commissions that stretch her boundaries in the design, size, and scope of projects, the environments where they are installed, and the techniques employed to make them.

As a first generation American, the future artist was born awash in her family's Chinese culture and art. Though her style has evolved in a manner that is not overtly Asian, the natural themes, deliberate use of line, and highly saturated colors from that region of the world influence her creations.

Gong's portfolio reveals her ability to discover design elements within the glass itself. "If I see a nice piece of glass, I am generally not inclined to design around it. I prefer using this old material and giving it a new voice within a contemporary design." She understands that this orientation flies in the face of how most glass artists are taught. "Our common way is to teach craft or technique without a sense of design. People develop skill in a particular technique and become the teachers of it. They may use that technique with only subtle variations in palette, texture, or form throughout a body of work." Gong is convinced that glass artists will only garner respect as fine artists if they succeed in subordinating the emphasis on technique and mediums to focus more on art.

The artist attributes her own awareness of the importance of design to a workshop with Narcissus Quagliata in the late 1970s that proved a primary influence on her work. "I was designing pictorial windows in art nouveau and Victorian styles without much personal meaning. I left that workshop thinking that I want to be an artist creating work that is representative of my time. A solid fabricator and craftsman, yes, but more than that. After that workshop, I began developing my own artistic voice."

Gong loves using different tools and artistic processes to express her design aesthetic. Today she employs a wide variety of glass techniques for her architectural art glass designs including etching, painting, lamination, fusing, and mosaic work for windows, walls, and structures. Gong's style across all these mediums emerges as strongly organic, contemporary, free-flowing, and enlivened by movement. She gets excited when a project gives her the opportunity to combine several processes together, to work materials and processes at larger scale for interior or exterior environments. "I just need to find the projects that will allow me to apply all that I have to offer. I'm not afraid to try new things. I drive my suppliers and associates crazy, but I am proud of my work. It's the challenge that keeps the work exciting."



*Nancy Gong, Lily from the Character Series, inspired by details in Gong's two-dimensional designs and cultural adornment, 28" x 12" x 12", 2002. Animated sculptures combining glass and steel in a fresh, new way.*

*Photo by Tim Wilkes.*



### Variety and Spice in Commissioned Work

While Gong has built relationships with galleries around creating collectible pieces, she resolutely asserts, “I am definitely a commission artist.” She enjoys the commission process—learning about new areas of study, telling different stories, and using assorted techniques and processes as vehicles for each project. Chiefly, though, she loves interacting with clients and searching around her toolbox for just the right approach and design to meet each client’s needs.

“Clients generally give some input but leave a fair degree of room for me to explore and express the vision.” Gong uses this discretionary space to research subject matter, to investigate new mediums and technologies, and to continuously expand her voice in glass and the knowledge of her field.

The artist lives in a relatively conservative region of the country, so she feels fortunate to be able to make a living from artwork designed in a contemporary style. “In my commissions, what’s really important is being able to express myself through the work and to create art that is meaningful for the people who will experience it. Bringing those two components together makes all the effort worthwhile. That makes me very happy.”

*Nancy Gong, Genesee River: Watershed, two lights 7' x 4', 2016. The glass art shares the big picture story about the storm water management and the Genesee River Water Shed through an educational, decorative, connective design about storm water management and the Genesee River Water Shed.*

*Photo by Christopher Maggio.*

Gong’s biggest challenge as a commission artist is not so much finding work as finding the kind of projects she wants to do. “I keep that challenge front and center when I decide how to present my art. I never put anything out there that I don’t want to continue to do. I don’t advertise, because I’m not doing vernacular pieces. But if you want to do more independent work, potential clients need to see your work in the world and to understand what you are capable of.

“I can’t make the same thing all the time. I would be bored to death. To quote glass caster Danny Lane, ‘It would be like eating the same meal every day.’ I constantly want to taste something else, something new in my work. I want my artwork to evolve, to stay fresh.”



### Setting Sights on Larger-Scale Work

One of Gong's ambitions is to work on larger scale projects than those she has yet attempted. Her works to date have been substantial medium-size commissions, though the scale of her work is growing. "I love working big. The presence of large-scale installations can transform the mood and emotion in a space in a powerful way. Working with glass for large installations provides a greater opportunity to interact with light and shadows in the environment."

Even as she says this, Gong recognizes that working at a larger scale has implications and presents new challenges in terms of materials and design, studio space, and changes to her solitary work habits. The challenges start with design. "Most of my art has been freestyle representational work. Telling a story may be appropriate for certain large projects, but I question how well that design approach lends itself to other large-scale applications. While I don't appreciate the practice of stamping out repetitious patterns to cover a broader canvas, I am moving toward a conceptual design approach in my new work."

In terms of material, Gong notes that handmade, mouth-blown glass is irregular, which can make it difficult to use with a process such as water jet cutting. "Many of my designs are made with large-size pieces that don't cut well via water jet, because blown sheet glass is not flat. But Wendell Castle, an internationally known woodworking artist, once suggested that if artwork is too easy, the target is too close. I find that this is true for me. When the going gets tough, I remind myself that if what I do is so easy, then everybody would be doing it. There's always a solution to be found."

*Nancy Gong, Fermata Rapture, hand cut, mouth-blown sheet glass etched and painted, with fused glass, laminated, two lights 56" x 25" and 2 lights 70" x 25", 2013. Designed for two musicians with an affinity for music, art, culture, and color.*

*Photo by Christopher Maggio.*

### Implications of Scale on Studio Space

From the outset of her artistic career, Gong has worked in a variety of home studios. "Otherwise, I'd never see my husband! I work alone in my studio except when I need specific help on a project."

The artist characterizes her studio as a well-designed, dreamy, flexible work space with high ceilings and a great view that feels good to work in. It is a compact 1,000 square feet, of which 540 are devoted to fabrication. She has worked from this studio since 1994. With all of the new processes and their related equipment and materials, however, it is filling up quickly.

Gong is determined that she'll adapt to make her studio space work. "To this point, the architect-designed studio functions well as a result of its flexibility, but as the size of projects continues to grow I anticipate the need to collaborate with others for space and access to larger kilns. I just finished a project for the Rochester Museum and Science Center, for example, that took up all of my available benches. I got through the process by building transportable, stackable boards. Some of the larger pieces would not fit in my kiln, so I had to rent kiln time elsewhere."

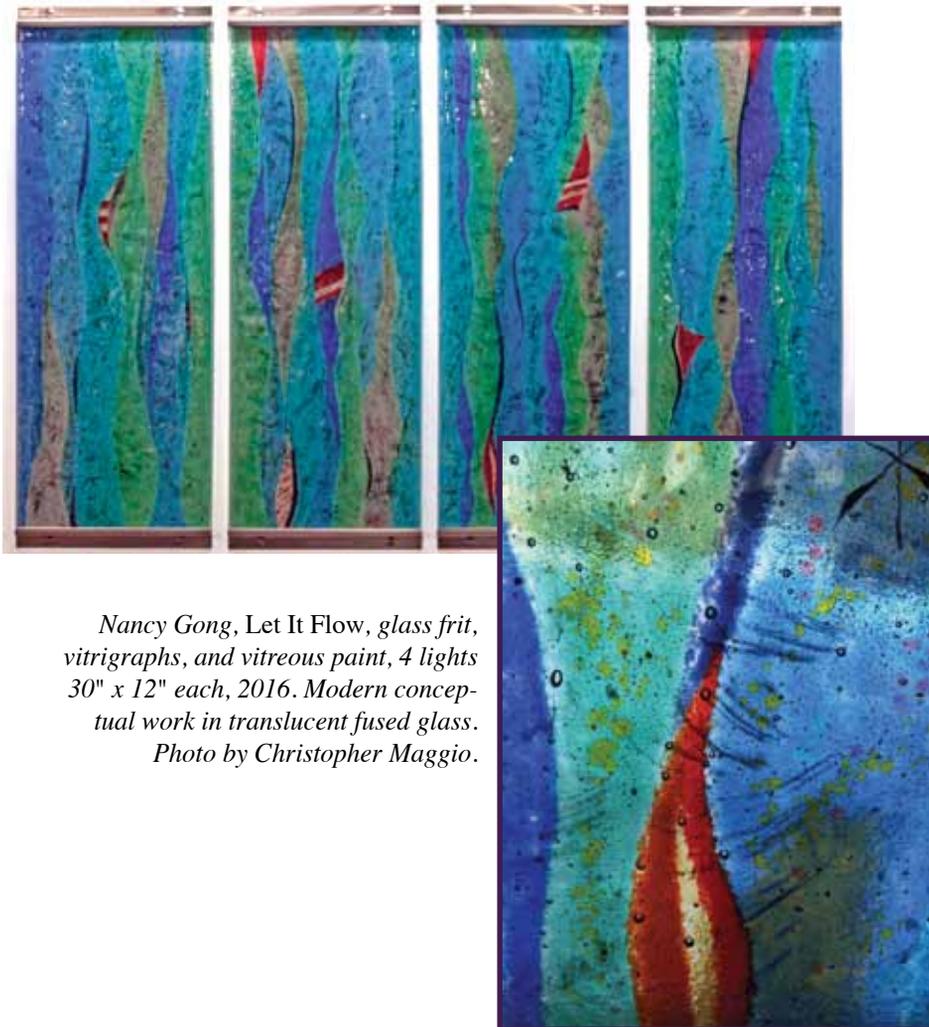
## Implications of Scale for Collaboration

"I have generally worked alone, but as projects get bigger, I see myself needing to collaborate more with other industries and fabrication studios. Having established professional relationships worldwide makes large-scale projects more doable."

One of Gong's largest installations to date is a 10-foot by 54-foot curvilinear etched glass wall titled *In Art, Science and Life, What is the Question?* The art glass wall was completed for Administration Services and the Innovation Center of Rochester Institute of Technology (RIT) in 2009. The installation consists of 13 panels, each weighing more than 400 pounds. Etched images relate to each of the Institute's nine colleges with a binary code quote running the length of the wall. "A lot of research went into that design. We had to proof the code very carefully. I developed a great interest and appreciation for physics as the primary design emphasis."

The wall functions both to physically divide a lobby from the innovation space and to meaningfully connect the spaces. Although the building has been repurposed since the wall's installation, Gong is delighted to go back and observe that the art casts a peaceful atmosphere that still welcomes students to a positive space to be curious, to meet, or to hang out. The wall is still relevant.

This project is another example of how Gong addresses the realities of the collaboration required to work on large-scale pieces. "I couldn't deliver that project alone. I had to lay out a plan for the logistics of each step, explicitly articulating where and when I needed to work in the studio, the glass company, the blast room, or on-site at RIT. All of the design work was done in the studio, then scaled to full size. Preparation of the glass, design transfer, and stencil preparation was done on-site at the glass company, where they provided guys to flip each 400-pound panel as needed. We then transported the prepared glass with artwork to a blast room where it was etched. The glass was then transported to RIT, where I created the hand-chipped texture on-site and installed the wall. Each panel of glass was handled 12 times."



*Nancy Gong, Let It Flow, glass frit, vitrigraphs, and vitreous paint, 4 lights 30" x 12" each, 2016. Modern conceptual work in translucent fused glass. Photo by Christopher Maggio.*



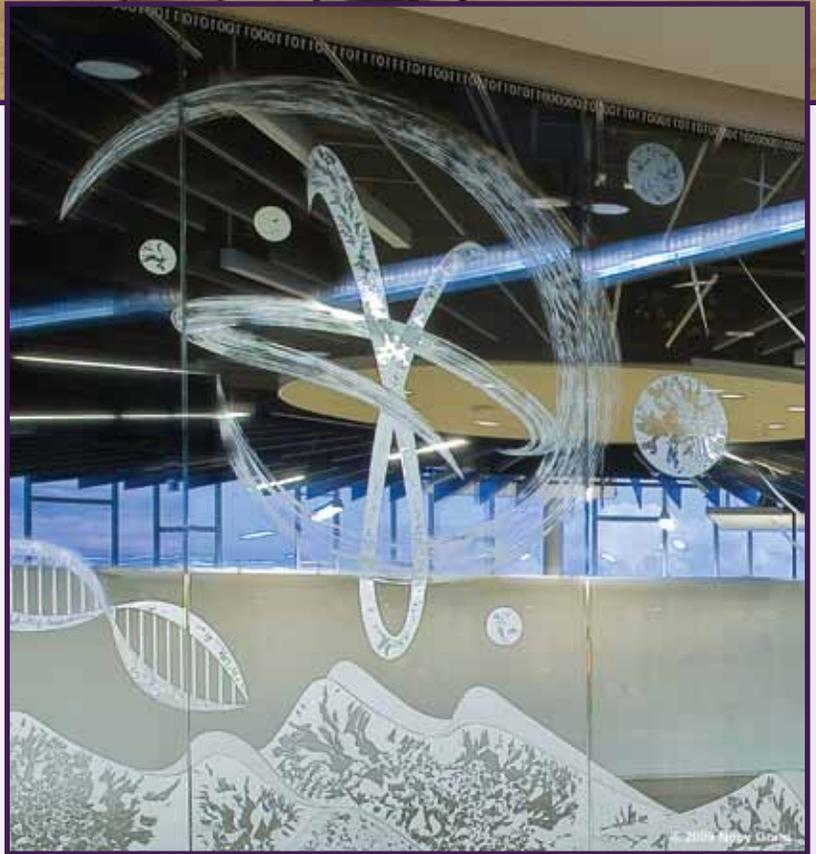
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*Nancy Gong, In Art Science and Life, What Is the Question?, art glass wall connecting two areas within the Administrative Services Building and Innovation Center at RIT, 10' x 54', 2016. The etched and glue chipped "Bose Einstein Condensate Theory Wave" section was hand-chipped on-site. Photo by Don Cochran.*



One of the finishing processes for the RIT project needed to be done in consistent environmental conditions with the glass located on the same plane. Straight from the blast room with resist remaining on the glass, all 13 panels had to achieve a consistent random texture. Hot molten glue was applied to the vertical surface, cooled in a building without heat, then chipped off amidst all kinds of construction still underway throughout the space. This sort of collaboration gives me access to people who have the range of skills, expertise, facilities, and manpower I need to make these larger works happen.

Gong pursues public art competitions and has completed a number of local and regional public art projects in addition to the RIT project. From an artistic perspective, she is not convinced that such competitions are the way to go. They are largely driven by budget and politics, which can have the effect of compromising artistry. Practically speaking, it is especially tough to break into distant markets. She continues to submit proposals, though, and to delight when surprising matches come of them.

The artist is preparing for a future with bigger projects—shifting her marketing research to potential sources for work, nurturing relationships in the U.S. and abroad with collaborators such as fabricators, and building connections to resources to help her in anticipation of the next stage of her art. "With so many possibilities, it's an exciting place to be!"

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